

What is sacred music and why is it important?

The Barking Dog Polka. The Notre Dame Fight Song. The theme song from the movie “Titanic.” The tune from the Oscar Meyer Wiener commercial. What do these pieces of music have in common? Besides their associations with some of our favorite pastimes—dancing, watching sports, movie-going, and eating—these pieces of music have also made appearances in Catholic liturgies. (And I have the documentation and eyewitness accounts to verify it!)

Even though these examples are of the rarer kind, for some, their inclusion into the liturgy is welcome; for others, such music is certainly not. Regardless of which (if either) category you might align yourself with, it is worth asking the question: What did the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council say about it? Are they to thank—or blame—for this music in the liturgy?

To begin with, the Fathers make clear in the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (CSL) that music is not simply “window dressing” for the rites, but rather sacred song “forms a necessary or integral part of the solemn liturgy” (n. 112) and that “worship is given a more noble form when the divine offices are celebrated solemnly in song... (n. 113). This is especially true of the sung texts of the liturgy. Its not a matter of singing at the Mass, for example, but actually singing the Mass itself. In other words, when the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council encourage the promotion of music at the Mass, they consider the dialogues between the priest and the people, the prayers of the priest, and the people’s response to be of the greatest importance (see number 112).

When judging a particular piece of music or musical setting, it is useful to recall what the purpose of such music is in the first place, which is “the glory of God and the sanctification of the faithful” (n. 112). This is a lot to ask of music, and not all music is able to accomplish these ends. To do so, the Council Fathers stated that liturgical music must have the “needed qualities” (nn. 112, 121): holiness, beauty, and universality.

First of all, sacred music must be holy, excluding all things secular, “not only in itself, but in the manner in which it is presented by those who execute it” (Pius X, *Tra le sollecitudini*, n. 2). About sacred music, John Paul II says “Today, moreover, the meaning of the category ‘sacred music’ has been broadened to include repertories that cannot be part of the celebration without violating the spirit and norms of the Liturgy itself” (*On the Centenary of Tra le sollecitudini*, n. 4). Since not all music has been “set apart” for the worship and glory of God, not all music can be considered sacred. But this does not mean that non-sacred music therefore has nothing to offer: it means rather that it has not been set apart for the express purpose of glorifying God and sanctifying the world. By analogy, pajamas are not useless, but they are at least out of place in a Catholic church on a Sunday morning (just as wearing a sport coat to bed is unsuitable).

The second “needed quality” of sacred music is goodness of form: it must be “true art.” Sacred considerations aside, the music must be good according to musical standards: it ought to have good pitch, rhythm, sound quality, and melody, among other things. Finally, liturgical music should be universal. That is, music used in the liturgy, even if it has qualities unique to its own culture, must possess the universal characteristics “of sacred music that nobody of another nation may receive, on hearing them, an impression other than good” (*Tra le sollecitudini*, n. 2). The Council Fathers go on to say that chant, polyphony, and music using the pipe organ possess these qualities in a particular way, for they are “set apart” or sacred (holiness), shine with artistic merit (goodness), and are recognized as sacred (universality). Other kinds of music and instruments, however, are also allowed, provided they possess the qualities of holiness, goodness, and universality (see nos. 112, 116, 120).

May the sacred music in your parish have these qualities as well. *Notre Dame*—that is, Our Lady, *not* the University—pray for us!

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